

Yesterday's Ordeal is Today's Adventure

Retracing the Underground Railroad from 1) Mobile, Alabama to Owen Sound, Ontario; and, 2) Buffalo, New York to Owen Sound, Ontario by Bicycle

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Why travel 2083 miles from 30° 40' N latitude at Mobile, Alabama in the United States over hills, hills and more hills to 44° 34' N in Owen Sound, Ontario? Furthermore, why do it by your own power on a bicycle?

There were many motivations to undertake the journey. It was a celebration of the success and significance achieved by those who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad. It was a history lesson to give both those involved, as well as others who followed the story, some sense of the courage and ambition required of the escaping slaves. It was a cause for promoting health, and a chance for participants to enjoy the company and camaraderie of their fellow cyclists of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds.

It is certainly not possible to recreate what escaping slaves experienced when trying to make their way to freedom via the Underground Railroad. While the cyclists faced the same distance and a similar degree of physical exertion, their trip was accompanied by the thrill of the challenge and the encouragement of all who watched and followed their journey. Seventy-seven communities en route had delegations to meet them, sometimes to feed them and always to cheer them on. They had the advantage of all the physical comforts that might make the trip easier: tents, clothes and cooking fuel, and, in the event of injury, the option to stop. Numerous media agencies across Canada and the United States covered the story which struck a chord with many - whether of Black ancestry or not. Cyclists and organizers experienced the excitement of seeing their names, their cause, and their efforts in print accompanied by maps and photographs. Locally, it was satisfying to see fruit borne of all our collective efforts to preserve and promote the Black heritage of our own area. By contrast, when escaping slaves made their journey in the nineteenth century, they did so in secrecy, with intense fear of being discovered and severely punished or killed as a consequence. Oftentimes the endeavour meant permanently severing ties with loved ones.

The adventure, a joint project of the non-profit Adventure Cycling Association, and the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Minority Health, occurred in two stages. Both the long and "short" tour were born of a desire to encourage healthy lifestyles for all in light of increasing obesity levels across the United States. The Center for Minority Health in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh has a mandate to "eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities by the year 2010" and aims "to prevent risk factors for chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension and obesity by

engaging African American, Latino, and other minorities in cycling as part of a healthy lifestyle”.¹ This goal marries well with the goal of the Adventure Cycling Association, America’s largest non-profit bicycling organization, to “inspire people of all ages to travel by bicycle in order to explore the landscapes and history of America for fitness, fun and self discovery”.²

In the first ride, cyclists dipped their wheels in the Gulf of Mexico at Mobile, Alabama, on April 14, 2007, where the last known slave ship arrived in the United States in the summer of 1860. Admittedly, this multi-racial group of bikers would take a more open route than the escaping slaves, but the path chosen was as close as possible to the original escape route: based on the spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd”. This melody, among other instructions, bears a message to look to the Big Dipper, a constellation that points to the North Star, which many slaves used to guide their way. Along the way through Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York to their final destination in Owen Sound, Ontario, where they again dipped their wheels in Canadian waters at Georgian Bay, the group stopped at cities and sites pivotal to the Underground Railroad saga, such as the Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Cincinnati, Ohio, amongst others.³

To give you a taste of the on-the-road experience, here is an email update that Mario Browne, Project Director of the Center for Minority Health, circulated to the Bicycle Route Advisory Board of his experiences en route from Pittsburgh to Erie Spur:

Greetings All!

I thought I would take a minute to drop you all a line from Ripley, OH. Home of Rev. Rankin, and John Parker. It is so beautiful here, and the riding has been great.

It has been six days since I rejoined the tour in Hawesville, KY, and I have seen so much that it will be hard to tell it all.

One highlight has been New Albany, Indiana. (Yes, we rode back and forth through Kentucky and Indiana a couple of times.) There is a Carnegie Arts and History Center there that has on permanent display *Men and Women of the Underground Railroad in the Indiana and Kentucky Borderland*.

What a great exhibit! [...]

Let me tell you folks, it is no small thing lugging everything you need to survive on your bike up and down rolling hills. And when I say hills, I mean HILLS!

Folks, the tour is cracking up to be bigger and better than anyone could have imagined. We have been courted by the media, catered to by public and political dignitaries, and hosted and fed by local folks all along the route. People who plan and are currently doing their own bike rides along the trip are meeting us along the route and telling us how encouraged they are by what we are doing. [...]

¹ See Center for Minority Health website: www.cmh.pitt.edu

² See www.adventurecycling.org

³ Harriet Beecher Stowe is author of the classic *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

I'll end this segment of notes from the Underground by saying that the scenery has been pristine. Lots of bovine, equine, and other domesticated animal farms. Very friendly people everywhere, too.

The folks on the ride are really coming together, and I think that the tour has been more than anyone could have expected. In the beginning, there was some grumbling about all of the media coverage, but now folks are eating it up. Many of the riders have been featured in the local press from Mobile up to Cincinnati. Many of them making the front page. [...] Well, we will arrive in Cincinnati, OH in a couple of days where I will try to get to another computer and share more Notes From the Underground. I will share pictures and notes when I get back to Pittsburgh.

P.S. Remember to check the CMH and WPXI websites for pictures and articles. Keep Pedaling and Ride On!

Miss you all,
Mario

On May 29, 2007, after 46 days of cycling, the group of 17 riders reached Owen Sound, which is considered to be the most northern terminus of the Underground Railroad (see our front cover image of their celebratory wheel dip in the Owen Sound Harbour). The party included men and women in their early 30s, but the average age was 60 with the oldest participant a fit 77 years of age. The most difficult leg of the journey was posed by the 23,700 metres of vertical challenge spread over three days of travel across the hills of Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky.

There was also a second trip, called the Underground Railroad Celebration Ride, where 89 cyclists ranging in age from 8 to 80 “pedal[led] the final leg of the path of freedom” from Buffalo, New York to Owen Sound, Ontario passing through Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Dundas, Milton, Georgetown, Orangeville, Shelburne, Dundalk, Collingwood and Walter’s Falls. The group was accompanied by Anthony Cohen, author of *Underground Railroad: A Personal Journey*, who walked the Underground Railroad twice in the late 1990s – his first walk was such a success that he took a film crew to accompany him for a second walk – accompanied the group from Buffalo to Owen Sound.⁴

Upon arrival in Collingwood, they were met by Emancipation Collingwood and Culture Representative, Janie Cooper-Wilson and area mayors. They later enjoyed a visit to the nearby Sheffield Park Black Cultural Museum. When they reached their final stop, all participated in Owen Sound’s 150th Homecoming Parade held the same weekend as the 145th Owen Sound Emancipation Celebration Festival. They then took in the Emancipation Picnic at Owen Sound’s Harrison Park and visited the *From Slavery to Freedom: African Canadians in Grey County* as well as the *Emancipation Festival Art Show* exhibits at Grey Roots Museum & Archives, located just minutes south of Harrison Park in the Municipality of Georgian Bluffs.

⁴ For more about Cohen, visit <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/honors/forum.php?yr=9900&id=4>

There is an imaginative power invoked by the journey that builds an appreciation of what was - even if it is to make clearer for us to be thankful that we did not know what they knew. We can be grateful to have not been called to display, and can only admire, the genuine courage that is endurance under adversity. The Adventure Cycling Association has a 2008 Underground Railroad Celebration Ride from Buffalo to Owen Sound already in the works. To find out more, visit <http://www.adventurecycling.org/tours/index.cfm>

Further Resources:

Keyes, Allison. "Biking the Trail of the Underground Railroad," National Public Radio, May 20, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10254829>
Click on the map for a more detailed pop-up map.

www.mikenjoan24.blogspot.com Find out first hand what the journey was like from the free-spirited Mike and Joan, who not only conquered the big ride, but blogged and photographed it extensively as well.

Spratling, Cassandra. "Cycling in freedom's footsteps," *Detroit Free Press*, August 26, 2007. To see a more detailed map of the Buffalo, New York to Owen Sound, Ontario ride click on the map in the photo gallery which accompanies this article. This link also points to a listing of six must-sees on the Buffalo to Owen Sound route. <http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070826/FEATURES07/708260601>

Adventure Cycling Tours and Center for Minority Health, University of Pittsburgh details about the route are at: <http://www.adventurecycling.org/ugrr/index.cfm> and the Mobile, Alabama to Owen Sound, Ontario ride are at: <http://www.adventurecycling.org/tours/2007ugrr.cfm>
Details about the Buffalo to Owen Sound "final leg" celebration ride are at: <http://www.adventurecycling.org/tours/2007ugrrcelebration.cfm>
For details about partnership with the Center for Minority Health at the University of Pittsburgh see: <http://www.adventurecycling.org/routes/partnering.cfm> and www.cmh.pitt.edu There is more still on the Adventure Cycling website. It is worth spending a little time surfing around it to find out about the "roots of the route".